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AUTHOR O'Donnell, James
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study described in this paper was to explore the experience of student teachers working in a track-system and the meaning drawn from that experience. In order to gain access to this meaning, the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing was utilized. This research model is based on a format that one makes meaning of his or her experience after reflecting on the constitutive details of that experience. Three tape-recorded, 90-minute interviews spaced 3-7 days apart were conducted. The interviews focused on the participant's biography, the present experience of student teaching, and the meaning of the student teaching experience. The interviewees consisted of 31 student teachers, 15 male and 16 female, most of whom were in upper tracks in their own schooling. Excerpts from interviews are included, and findings suggest that student teachers react to the track-system in various ways. For some, tracking represents a logical grouping; some find the system to be an annoyance that has to be tolerated; and some are opposed and begin to work against the effects on students in the classrooms. Remarks in the conclusions section suggest that it is necessary for preservice teacher education students to understand their own history with tracking and that teacher educators need to find methods to lessen the impact of tracking on student teachers. (LL)

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THE TRACK-SYSTEM: ITS SOCIALIZING IMPACT ON STUDENT TEACHERS

A Paper Presented

by

James O'Donnell
Assistant Professor of Curriculum & Instruction
New Mexico State University

American Educational Research Association
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Introduction

This paper discusses the experience of student teachers working in a track-system. The paper explores the complexities of student teachers' experience and understanding of tracking and analyzes tracking's impact on student teachers. It explores how a student teacher's prior experience with schooling and tracking impacts on the student teacher's experience of a track-system. Furthermore, the paper shares how the administration's policies on tracking affect a student teacher's experience and how cooperating teachers and classroom students participate in the development of student teachers' perceptions of the track-system. Finally, the paper discusses how the track-system impacts on student teachers' pedagogical practices.

Tracking, Teachers and Student Teachers

Tracking is the sorting of students on the basis of shared interests and ability. The rationale is that grouping will help each student to achieve his or her potential and will ease the teaching task.

Oakes (1985) states that tracking remains with us today because of tradition. Tracking is well established in the schools and according to its supporters represents a "commonsense approach" to the teaching of children who come to school with measurable differences in skills, ability and

attitude (Nevi, 1987). Furthermore, the proponents of tracking see it as democratic and effective. For those in the upper levels, classes can be made more challenging and for those in the lower levels, individualized attention can be guaranteed (Cramer, 1987).

Critics of tracking have shown that the track-system is not the intended democratic panacea (Oakes, 1985). For students in the lower track, tracking operates against their rights to achieve an equal quality education. The track-system functions to limit opportunity by reducing the curricular content offered to students in the lower track (Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Oakes, 1985). In addition, the track-system appears to maintain inequalities of class, race and gender that mirror the larger society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Persell, 1976; Apple, 1982; Oakes, 1985).

Researchers have examined the work of teachers as practitioners, to see how their practices affect students in the lower tracks. For example, some researchers have looked at teachers' instructional practices to see whether these practices promote academic achievement for students in the lower track (Darling-Hammond, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; Gamoran, 1987; Vanfossen, 1987). Some researchers claim that teachers in the lower track set lower expectations for students (Hollingshead, 1949; Rist, 1970; Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Rosenbaum, 1976; Howe & Edelman, 1985; Oakes, 1985). Furthermore, some critics view this as

a function of teachers' racial and social class bias (Rist, 1970; Epstein, 1985; Howe & Edelman, 1985).

These studies have looked at teachers' interactions with students in different tracks or at teachers' attitudes about students of different tracks. The teacher has been studied solely in terms of his or her attitude about, or behavior towards, students of different tracks.

We do not understand what it is like for teachers to work in a track-system. If a track assignment carries prescriptions for students (Oakes, 1985), then does a teacher's class schedule carry a set of prescriptions that define who he or she is, and how that teacher practices his or her work? The research in this area is very limited.

In a study conducted in a high school English department, Finley (1984) found that teachers define their status by the track that they teach. Teachers view the upper track classes as more academic and, thus, more challenging. For these teachers, the rewards come from working with students who are "responsive". Thus, the idea that students who occupy the top classes are more qualified than their counterparts in the lower track reflects upon the teacher's level of competence and qualification as a good teacher. Finley found that for these teachers of the upper track, positive reinforcement came, not only from the students, but also, from the esteem that parents, colleagues and administrators bestowed upon them.

Similarly, a relationship exists between self-esteem and track assignment for teachers of the lower track (Finley, 1984). The teachers of the lower track feel a sense of self-doubt regarding their competence as teachers and believe they are not "teacher enough" to work in the upper tracks. Finley indicates that the lower track teachers interpret their class assignments as an estimation of the administration's and fellow teachers' measure of their competence. Teachers, however, do not have only one set of classes, that is, all college prep or all general or business level. Teachers usually have a mixture of classes, drawn from each track.

Page (1987) has shown that teachers' perspectives on tracking are influenced by the type of community they are serving. Teachers express the sentiment that if the blue collar community wants basic skills and job training, then it is the teacher's job to provide that service. In this instance, teachers' work reflects the desires of the community.

Dar (1985) found in her study that some teachers' attitudes toward tracking are dependent on the subject that they teach. For example, teachers say that heterogeneous grouping is appropriate for reading and social studies classes but believe that math and science are too skill oriented for such a grouping pattern.

For the beginning teacher, the system of tracking

highlights issues of equity and may create frustrations as they work with students assigned to the lower track (Seidman et al., 1988). These new teachers hold high expectations for their students, yet these students do not try, supposedly because of their own low expectations of themselves. Tracking also highlights for the beginning teacher an awareness of the connection between students' social class or racial membership, and their placement in a track-system. The outcome for the beginning teacher is sometimes either acquiescence to a system that perpetuates racial, social class and gender inequities or, frustration and perhaps, departure from the teaching profession (Seidman et al., 1988).

Each of these findings (Finley, 1984; Dar, 1985; Page, 1987; Seidman et al, 1988) suggests that the tracking pattern in one's school affects teachers' perceptions of their own work and how that work is to be executed. For student teachers, there is little evidence of tracking's impact on their professional development and socialization into the profession. Socialization is the process of acquiring those skills, values and attitudes that identifies one as a member of a group (Lacey, 1977, p. 13-14). For student teachers, their practicum experience represents one part of their professional socialization.

Researchers have explained student teacher socialization by looking exclusively at the individual's prior experience

and how this comes into play in the development of a teacher perspective (e.g Lortie, 1975; Schemp, 1987). Others have rejected this notion and have focused their attention on the role of the institution in conforming individuals to the needs of the institution (e.g. Edgar & Warren, 1969; Hoy & Rees, 1977; Copeland, 1980). In contrast to these perspectives, other researchers have questioned the deterministic nature of socialization as posited within the above perspectives.

Lacey (1977), Zeichner and Tabachnick (1985) and Goodman (1984) hold that biography or prior experience does play a significant role in how one reacts to a given situation. They, however, contend that student teachers are socialized into the profession in part by their own biographies and in part by the constraints of the institution (Lacey, 1977; Goodman, 1984; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985). Thus, teacher socialization is a dynamic process "in which individual intent and institutional constraint both play a role in affecting a beginning teacher's entry into the teaching role" (Zeichner & Tabachnick, p. 10, 1985).

These critics not only question the concept of socialization as used in earlier studies but they also question the research methods employed to obtain data pertaining to student teacher development (Lacey, 1977; Zeichner & Grant, 1981; Goodman, 1984). Critics contend

that the interpretation of the data relied on the central tendencies in groups, thus, not providing or allowing for individual differences. "The ... strategy of describing central tendencies in groups of beginning teachers while assuming school contexts to be relatively homogeneous tends to obscure important differences among teachers and among schools and has generally failed to illuminate the subtle processes of beginning teacher socialization" (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985, p. 4). Critics argue that some methods such as questionnaires and surveys are designed to obtain peoples' attitudes, opinions or ideologies, thus neglecting the experiential base of ideological formation. In other words, opinions and attitudes are based on one's lived experience. Thus, to understand how one came to form an opinion, it is necessary to understand one's life experiences (Seidman, 1985).

The objective of this study was to explore the experience of student teachers working in a track-system and the meaning they made of that experience. In order to gain access to the meaning of the student teachers' experience with tracking, the study utilized the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing.

Methodology

In-depth, phenomenological interviewing is a research model based on a format utilized by Ken Dolbeare and David Schuman (see Schuman, 1982) which has been further developed

by Seidman (1983; 1985). According to Seidman (1983; 1985) this interviewing model operates on the assumption, taken from Schutz (1967), that one makes meaning of his or her experience after reflecting on the constitutive details of that experience. This interviewing model follows a sequence of three, ninety-minute, interviews spaced three to seven days apart (Seidman, 1983; 1985). The structure and sequence of the interviewing allows the participant to reconstruct the experience and then to reflect on the meaning of that experience (Seidman & Santilli, 1988).

In the first interview, attention is focused on the participant's previous background experience (Seidman, 1983; 1985). The interviewer asks the participants to describe and "reconstruct" (Seidman, 1985) those events from their family, childhood, school and work experiences that have led them to the work that they now do, which is in this case, student teaching. This interview provides a description of the participant's social and autobiographical background.

The focus of the second interview is the participant's present experience (Seidman, 1983; 1985). In this interview the participants are asked to describe, as concretely as possible, the details of their work as a student teacher. The emphasis is centered on the participant's actions or thoughts about those experiences. For example, a student teacher may provide descriptions of a lesson she or he taught, or an interaction between a student and herself or

himself. This second interview describes the participant's experience within an organizational context.

The third, and final, interview asks the participants about the meaning they make of their work (Seidman, 1983; 1985), which in this case, refers to the student teachers' experience. The first and second interviews create the foundation from which the participants can make connections and reflect on the meaning that this work has for them (Seidman & Santilli, 1988).

Selection of the Participants

I had access to student teachers, primarily because of my dual role as a university education instructor and as a research associate for the Teacher Education Clinical Site Project[1]. These roles provided me with access to those student teachers at the clinical site and also those participating in the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP).

My strategy for selecting participants was based on what is termed purposeful sampling (See, Patton, 1987, pp. 91-108; Seidman, in press). I wanted to interview student teachers who worked in a track-system. In selecting the participants, however, I wanted to get student teachers

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[1]) This project is a collaborative effort between the University's Secondary Teacher Education Program and three local school districts. At the time of this study, there were only two school districts participating in the project. This project was partially supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education.

whose experiences would reflect the range of places in which student teachers learn their craft. Thus, I tried to find student teachers who worked in rural, suburban and urban settings. Also, I attempted to get a wide range of student teachers whose experiences would reflect the diversity of the student teacher population. I sought to interview a balanced group of male and female student teachers and who taught in major academic areas, namely, English, foreign language, health, math, science, and social studies. Finally, I looked for student teachers whose experiences also reflected the racial diversity of our country.

Thirty-one participants were interviewed between fall 1987 and summer 1989. Of these thirty-one participants, fifteen were male and sixteen were female. Two of the participants were persons of color[2]. Twenty-eight of the participants were student teachers; one was an intern and the remaining two were completing their second year of teaching. Twenty-one participants worked in suburban schools whereas seven selected rural schools and three selected to work in urban schools. Except for the two beginning teachers, all of the participants received their teacher education at the same university in the northeast.

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[2]) The student teachers in the STEP are predominantly white. In the spring semester of 1989, only one person of color was student teaching from a population of seventy-four student teachers. This appears to reflect a national trend peculiar to large, predominantly white (student, faculty, administration) state institution.

The characteristics of the school did not play a significant role in determining whether or not I would select a participant. For the most part, public schools within the socio-political context of the United States education system organize and group students according to ability and interest (Goodlad, 1984, p. 157-159). In essence, the idea of separating students (and people) according to their ability and interests (jobs) is a social, political and cultural phenomenon which is not unique to just a handful of schools. I felt confident that most schools within the United States operate under some sort of tracking system that sorts, selects and separates students according to their ability level.

Each participant was interviewed three times. Each session lasted approximately ninety minutes. The interviews were spaced approximately from three to seven days apart. The interviews were held at their school site, their home or at the university.

Each interview was taped-recorded and these tape-recordings were transcribed by two secretaries. From the transcripts of the interviews, twenty-four theme files emerged. Some of these theme files were idiosyncratic to one or two participants and in the end were discarded. Some categories on closer examination were found to overlap. These were later grouped into one category. These thematic excerpts became the basis for the analysis of understanding

the student teacher's experience of working in a track-system.

Student Teachers in a Track-System

In this section, I look at how biography; the administrative policies on tracking; the cooperating teachers and classroom students participate in informing the participants about a track-system.

Biography is identified as an important factor in understanding how student teachers are socialized into teaching. It is assumed that their prior experience as classroom students influences how they view the work of teachers (e.g. Lortie, 1975; Schemp, 1987). Thus, it is from their own experience as students that their teaching perspectives are formed.

Each of the participants in this study could recall their own experience with tracking in school. The majority of the student teachers had been placed in the upper tracks (college prep or honors) of their schools. Only three participants were placed in the lower tracks. Prior experience in the upper or lower tracks did not come to mean that student teachers supported or rejected the track-system. Within this group there were differences in how their school biography influenced their experience in the track-system.

For some, their experience in the upper levels of schooling allowed them to accept the conditions of the

track-system. The track-system is viewed as a fact of schooling. It is individual tenacity, desire and resolve that separates one student from another. Thus, there are no systemic constraints, only individual ones.

> (Anna Ignacio[3], English) I went to a high school that was tracked...I knew there were different levels, but you could choose...which level you wanted. You had to keep a certain grade to stay in [the higher class].
>
> It's hard, because there are some students in my level three class who are much smarter...in English, than some in the college [prep], supposedly [the] higher level. But I think it's a choice [the students] make or other circumstances that are beyond their control that put them into this group. It's because they needed the individual help or they're just not interested. So, I think a lot [has] to do with them.

> (Mike Anderson, Math) I always knew there was tracking. I mean, I knew I was tracked when I was tracked...When I went into student teaching I didn't really think about it that much...I realized I had maybe some ideas about teaching based on the fact that I was in these upper tracked courses when I was a student. I didn't see what was happening down the hall. I was in my classes...The teacher usually liked us. It was a positive class, and people did work and stuff.

For others, the experience in the upper tracks serves as a reference point for how they taught their classes. Prior experience in this mode means that the students they encounter do not appear to be like students they remember themselves to be. Interactions with students unlike themselves present a struggle which they need to resolve.

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[3]) The names are pseudonyms. The gender and the subject identified are true. Unless indicated otherwise, the participants are secondary student teachers.

(Elizabeth Oliver, Science) I had certain preconceived notions before I got here. Basically, I know the kind of student that I was, as a high school student. I did my work. I did my homework. I was a so-called "good" student. The kind of student that every teacher likes to have in his or her class. All my friends were the same way. We were academically inclined and hard workers. I thought that that was the All-American student. [I] never had much interaction with students that varied from that. Because if they varied from that, the chances are they weren't in my classes. So, therefore they weren't friends.

For Robert Goldman, his prior experience in the upper tracks in school and subsequent life experiences did not prepare him for the type of students he found in the lower level.

(Robert Goldman, Social Studies) It's a different world. I never was in a general level class myself in high school, so I don't know what the issues are. My comfort level is just not there yet.

I can understand what the college prep kids want out of school. I know what their motivations are. I know that at least a few of them are genuinely excited about the material. Those motivations make sense to me.

It doesn't make sense to me to reject school because it's not fun. It doesn't make sense to me to think of school as a jail. It doesn't make sense to my experience to think of school as a place of oppression. That's the attitude I have thrown at me from these general level kids. That school is a painful place. My experience tells me that school is not a painful place.

There were only three participants who had prior experience as students in a track other than college prep. For some, their prior experience as students in the lower tracks recalled feelings of annoyance and pain. One participant found that these feelings served as a catalyst to resist openly participating in the track-system.

> [Kathleen Stacey, Social Studies] I remember grammar school, such a drag. When I was in second grade, they gave me a test. They found out I was dyslexic. So, automatically, if you're dyslexic, it must mean you're stupid. They put me in a low level class, all C level classes. So, up until about the seventh grade, I was in mostly lower level classes, not a lot of ambition going on there. I was bored out of my head about the first seven years of school.
>
> If you're bored all the time, why should you do anything after a while? It didn't matter how well I did. I kept ending up in the same situation anyway. So, why should I try?...Most schools are so rigid in their tracking system, that unless the parents pressure for movement, it doesn't matter how well you do...If you're the top of a C level class, they'll say, "Well, she'll be at the bottom of a B level class, so let's just leave her where she is."
>
> It always annoyed me that I was labelled as a dyslexic person. People had false expectations about me. I learned to have no expectations for others...I was blackballed as a child and I knew from second grade forward that this was the way people treated me. I knew that I didn't like to be treated this way...I think if you are a victim of discrimination, it's much easier for you to step back from it and say, okay this is wrong. I don't like it when it happens to me. I won't do it to others.

In this study, I looked at the issue of biography in the manner that Lortie (1975) stated. I saw the student teachers' prior experience in school as contributing to their understanding and work within a track-system. The role biography plays in understanding the experience of student teachers with the track-system is complex. The data indicate that there is no simple correspondence between one's prior experience and how one confronted the issue of tracking.

For some student teachers, this prior experience did not prepare them well for what they encountered. Their

experience as students in the upper tracks did not prepare them for students who did not share their perspective and enthusiasm for school work. The classroom student in the lower track did not reflect, for some, the "All-American" student. In addition, for some participants, their experience in the upper tracks also influenced how they taught as well as how they perceived their students.

A few student teachers discovered that their prior experience, though incongruent with their present experience, operated not as a reflection of reality, per se, but as a reference point from which they were able to draw comparisons and understand their prior experience as just that, their own individual experience. They did not see their experience as "the experience" which reflects and represents the only experience.

It is important to notice that even prior experience in a lower track does not mean one is going to resist tracking. Kathleen Stacey's experience as a lower track student was interrupted and she experienced positive recognition for her abilities. On the other hand, Nancy Katz, a second year health teacher, remained in the lower levels throughout her schooling. She did not like tracking but was not sure what to do about it. It seems that her own ability was not validated even though she experienced success as a nurse and as a teacher. Her ambiguity about her own ability remains.

(Nancy Katz) I'm not saying that I'm not intelligent. But I just don't consider myself an

> intellectual...I think people who are creative tend to be intellectual...I'm not a real creative person. I'm more a typical nurse, everything has to be black and white.

Nancy Katz's prior experience in school and her present perspective can be understood within a larger cultural context. Sennett and Cobb (1972, pp. 58-76) talk about the badge of ability that people wear to distinguish themselves from others. In many ways, her own experience in a track-system influenced Nancy Katz to internalize the perspective of the dominant system that declared her not as intelligent or as capable as the students in the upper tracks. This characteristic of the victim adopting the dominant perspective parallels symptoms of subordinates of racial (Memmi, 1965), class (Freire, 1970) and gender (Baker Miller, 1976) oppression.

Administration. The administration of a school usually sets the policies and procedures for the day-to-day operations of the institution. As a policy making unit, the administration may ask for advice or heed the advice from the faculty. Many school administrations, however, operate in an autocratic fashion (Bastian et al., 1984, p.114, pp. 136-140). It is the administration which establishes and maintains school policies and procedures.

In regards to tracking, the administration may set policies and procedures for assigning students to different levels, for promoting students to a higher track and for retaining students, and for evaluating students. One policy

that administrators may establish for evaluative purposes is the weighted grade point system (Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1985). Some administrators schedule student classes and authorize the curriculum for each track.

The policies and procedures established by the administration not only affect the students but have impact on the teachers, and the student teachers, who must carry them out. For the student teachers, these policies and procedures may be unknown to them. But they do experience the effect of the administration's policies.

For many student teachers, the first introduction to the track-system comes from the descriptors and labels used to identify their classes.

> (Rosemary Allen, English) The [tracking] levels that they had at [the high school] were one through four: one being the highest, four being the lowest. The freshman were fours. The juniors were threes, so, they were still on the lower end of the scale. The seniors, ...it wasn't given a number...They were the college bound kids, they were the top kids.

> (Nancy Katz, Health, Beginning Teacher) When I walked in, they just said, "You have six-one, six-two, six-three, six-four, six-five."

> (Kathleen Stacey, Social Studies) When I came in here, they [said] "You're going to be teaching three A level college classes." I know what the people next door are teaching, what kinds of classes they have. I know what kids are AP [Advanced Placement] kids because they're called, the AP class. So you know who they are. It's not like it's hidden.

The issue of individual choice is pivotal in understanding some student teachers' individual perspectives

on tracking.

> (Richard Lane, Social Studies)I don't know how they exactly conclude to say that a kid should be in CP [College Prep] or the general [level] except that it's left up to the student...If you're going to have tracking, I think that's a pretty good way to do it.

> (Anna Costa, Science) The general biology kids, I think a lot of them are in that level because they don't want to do the work [in the upper level]...They pretty much keep themselves in that kind of general track so that they can do as much work as they want and get pretty good grades.

> (Arnold Jones, English) People go where their personalities lead them...In the upper level classes are the kids who...were motivated to try as hard as they could and to keep up as best they could. They had begged to get up into those upper level classes.

The country's doctrine of individual responsibility (Ryan, 1981) and the idea of education as a meritocracy (Hurn, 1985) operate as reasons for the track-system and its maintenance. For some the idea that students have a choice and can select themselves into and out of a track provides a sense of the possibility that the track-system is in operation for the good of the student. For some student teachers this sense of possibility, however, seems to vanish once they are working in the system and are confronted with the realities of how the system works.

Anne Nutting talked about her discontent with the administration's policy on students moving from one track to the other.

> (Anne Nutting, English) They say these kids can switch levels at any time. But why should they?

> There's no impetus there. There's no sort of reward system built in.

Mitchell Omos working in a different school expressed a similar sentiment.

> (Mitchell Omos, English) I know that I was frustrated because in my second period class, one girl, this Black girl, didn't belong there. She belonged in the upper level. But she wanted the easy way out so she transferred into my class. She found out she couldn't transfer back into the other class unless she made up a huge amount of work. In other words, they had to go back and make up all this work. Once a kid said, "I have to make up all this work? Oh, I'll just stay in this class." So, they just didn't want to transfer.

For student teachers entering the system, the organizational context in which they work often remains hidden. They participate in it often not knowing how the system operates. The administration appears to provide little information that helps student teachers to understand how the track-system functions. But the established administrative policies and practices do affect the work of the student teachers.

In many cases, however, the search for the official policy may be fruitless. Oakes (1985, p. 43-46) discusses the hidden nature of tracking. She describes how some schools state that they do not have tracking. Further investigations into class schedules and course descriptions, however, often reveal a tracking scheme.

The Cooperating Teacher. The role of the cooperating teacher in the socialization of student teachers has been

documented. Studies have shown that the cooperating teacher has an influence on the student teacher. This influence can either enhance a skill learned at the university or college or it can block its usage depending on the cooperating teacher's use or non-use of the same teaching skill (Copeland, 1980). The evaluative role of the cooperating teacher can impact on the experience of the student teacher in determining what they think they can or cannot do (e.g. Iannaccone, 1963; Edgar & Warren, 1969). Others have shown that the cooperating teacher can affect the attitudes that student teachers adopt (Bunting, 1988).

In this study of tracking and its impact on the development of student teachers, I found that the cooperating teachers' perspectives on tracking influence the developing perspective of the student teachers. The influence of the cooperating teacher affects how student teachers see their students; it affects how the student teachers prepare and teach their classes; and it also affects how the student teachers grade and evaluate their students.

Cooperating teachers share knowledge about students and what their success or failure rate will be. In others words, they inform student teachers about who is going to pass or fail.

For Rosemary Allen, this exchange of information left her disillusioned and wondering about the power of prophecy.

(Rosemary Allen, English) I don't know if it's that new ideas aren't always welcome, [or] that some things just won't fly there. You become inculcated into this "teacher mentality." I think for the first month I sort of stayed pure.

I had this one student in this freshman low level class. [He was] getting nineties on all his tests. [He was] doing all his homework and was just trying so hard. I had this ongoing debate almost everyday with my cooperating teacher about why if Jeff is doing really well, why won't he get an A this marking period? He would always tell me, "He's going to do something before the end of the marking period to mess himself up." I don't think it was then, but Jeff started slacking off..It's like of course it would come true that there was something that was going to keep Jeff from getting his A. He should have had an A, and he didn't. He got like a C minus, and that just sort of disillusioned me.

Cooperating teachers tell student teachers about the characteristics of a class: What the class can do; how the class will respond. This advice may be direct, through conversations, or some student teachers may pick up information on how to interact with a class, through observations.

(Arnold Jones, English) Well, I saw [the lower level class] interacting with Mr. DeMato. I saw how he walks a delicate line between reining them in and letting them act out to a certain extent...He gave me a lot of precautionary tales about them, and how they were really difficult. I could see [from their] dress, attitude, mannerisms and behavior...I knew immediately that these folks could easily act out...People come in and slam books down on the desks. People would come and start complaining immediately... Vibes as much as anything.

Theresa Pappas learned that it was appropriate not to expect her lower level students to read the assignments.

(Theresa Pappas, English) What happens in that class [junior English], Mr. Hess doesn't make them read the story. That's why I have all the notes

> for them. He feels that the story would be too tough for some of them to get the concepts...I think he's right in a sense, that for some of them, if they had to read it, they would totally get lost. Some of the words, in there, would just be too big for them and too hard to understand.

Chris Knight, a science student teacher, talked about the curricular differences that he saw among the levels. He wondered about how these differences may have contributed to the attitudes of his students.

> (Chris Knight, Science) We [my cooperating teacher and I] talk about the different kids. He gave me some of the background on them...He never told me what to do. He would just give me ideas. "Sometimes this works with this kid. This kid used to be a lot worse. Sometimes there's nothing you can do; you just have to try and find things." He never assigned them homework...They never brought books home or anything like that.
>
> He had the lowest class and he had the advanced science seniors. The advanced kids just seemed to be doing so many innovative things [like] working on projects by themselves for a couple of weeks at a time. They had to enter science fairs and stuff like that...Maybe there wouldn't be so much of a difference in their levels of skill and knowledge if they would have been working together right from the start.

The information that student teachers receive from the cooperating teachers acts initially as a means to navigate through the workings of a track-system. This information provides student teachers with "knowledge" of the students in each track, how to teach them and the capability of each group of students. For some this "knowledge" remains as their guide to how the classes function and how to interact with each class. For others this "knowledge" is rejected. In its place student teachers' own experience, informed by

their interactions with the different track classes, becomes the basis for their new approach to teaching.

Stephanie O'Hara talked about how her cooperating teacher told her how to teach the lower level class. Stephanie described her initial acceptance of the cooperating teacher's advice and her later discontent with the advice.

> (Stephanie O'Hara, English) I've started giving my lower level classes more work, because I didn't think I was giving them enough work. When I took over the class from Marie, she hadn't given them a lot of assignments...I resent that I was told, "Oh, these students are not as good. So, you should grade them differently. They won't get everything, so you'll have to teach them differently." I don't think you have to teach them different things.
>
> I accepted the fact. She has a lot of experience and she must know that they can't do the work that everyone else can do. So, when I started out, I didn't expect a lot from them. But, this second half of this semester I've given them so much work.
>
> I wasn't giving them a lot at the beginning because she hadn't given them a lot. I didn't think that was right, because if it's harder for them to understand the work...wouldn't you give them more work so they'd understand it better? I mean, it just didn't make sense.

Other student teachers learned that some teachers held very strong opinions about tracking and that it was useless for them to try and discuss the pros or cons of the track-system.

> (Elaine O'Brien, Social Studies) I listened about tracking. I didn't talk about it. The teachers there really thought that tracking was okay and important to have. [It] would be unfair to hold the bright students back. That's what they felt. They really felt committed to the brighter students. They felt like the slower kids aren't really going to do much with history anyway.

> [My cooperating teacher] really thinks that tracking is incredibly important...He would talk about how much he loved the top tracks. How easy and fun they were to work with...It's just pretty clear what he thinks. I don't think he works with the lower track.
>
> (Arlene Henry, Science) [My cooperating teacher] felt that there are students that you can't reach...The implication for me was that, there is a point at which you have to stop trying. There's a point at which you have to stop worrying about it. Or there's a point at which you have to accept where the kid is...For me at this time, I'm not willing to accept that...
>
> I think that it's useless for me to argue with somebody who's been teaching for like sixteen or eighteen years. It's useless for me, having had no teaching experience, to try and argue with him about what I believe is possible. So, I just listened to him and took what was useful to me and not spend time arguing about whether I could be right about it.

I have found that for some student teachers these conversations with cooperating teachers and other school personnel appear to reinforce and support the notions that this is the "way it is." This helps to reduce their anguish and confusion and thus, permits them to accept the status quo. Furthermore, these voices of support help to relinquish them of responsibility. In essence, it says that there is not much that you can do. If this perspective is shared and supported by "professionals" with years of experience, then who is the student teacher to question such authority? For others, the information that is given to them by their cooperating teachers is politely taken and tucked away and only responded to or shown in the company of the cooperating teacher.

Cooperating teachers are experienced teachers. In some cases, they are identified as "master teachers" or "mentor

teachers." This is a sign of distinction, a symbol that declares that they are qualified. This declaration is based on their qualifications, and usually comes with the passing of years or "experience."

It is this mystique of experience that initially allows some student teachers to listen and to heed the advice of their cooperating teachers, administrators and other school faculty. But it is also the student teachers' experience and their own perspectives and ideals about education and children which help some of them to overcome some of this advice.

Students, Student Teachers and Pedagogy

It is in the classroom that student teachers meet and engage their students. It is in this intimate and personal exchange between student teacher and student that each come to know the other. But these interactions are in many ways invented by the system of tracking itself. It is not only the individual students the student teachers confront, but also the system of tracking. It is the system and its effects on students that student teachers come to know. But how the student teachers make sense of the students and their behaviors indicates how they understand the role that the track-system has on students.

Some student teachers move away from blaming the individual and look for reasons that can explain the lower level student. For some, these reasons are found in the

student's home environment. It seems that the home environment is the sole reason that is producing students who are not motivated, who reject authority and who lack maturity.

> (Elizabeth Oliver, Science) A lot of these kids have mothers who have no authority at home. [They] have no control whatsoever. I am another woman in these kids' lives...They just see it as another person who therefore has no authority and no control. That's how they perceive adult females...I say ninety percent of them come from broken homes or homes in which they're abusive. I can't say that about my [upper level] class. [That] class has a lot more stable home environments...These kids see females in a different light.

> (Anne Nutting, English) I'm having a really hard time with them because they're a lower level class...I think maybe part of it is because a lot of those kids have emotional problems. They don't want to have to deal with one more person on an emotional level...They're really afraid of that emotional recognition. They don't want to recognize that a teacher or...other classmates are capable of feeling something, of being hurt...They're very uncomfortable with that level of human relation.

For some student teachers, scientific explanations function as a means to make sense of students in the lower track.

> (Andrew Orr, Science) It seems to me that the kids in the basic classes in this school are pretty seriously disadvantaged students. They have learning disabilities. Most of the people in the basic level classes have something abnormal about them. There's like some developmental stuff that's just not up to par with where or how they should be for their age...A lot of them are from emotionally disturbed households. They have serious problems going on...If you're in the basic level, basically you're learning disabled. There's something medically wrong with you in terms of the norm.

> (Elizabeth Oliver, Science) [I have] two general biology classes...At least three-quarters of the students in my classes have some sort of learning disorder.

Student teachers are frustrated with students who do not sit in the classroom and remain absorbed in what the student teacher is teaching. In trying to understand the students' resistance, apathy and misbehaviors, some student teachers desperately reach for explanations that may momentarily seem reasonable. For most student teachers, these explanations are found in the individual's personality, in his or her background or in his or her "head." Student teachers seem to neglect how the track-system contributes to producing students who often think of themselves as "third-rate" or "failures."

Much of the research (Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Rosenbaum, 1976; Persell, 1977; Howe & Edelman, 1985; Oakes, 1985) indicates that the system of tracking affects students' sense of themselves as learners. It also appears to affect students' self-esteem. Furthermore, the research indicates that the system operates unequally in terms of providing students in the lower track with an equal quality education. It is these effects that student teachers confront in their classrooms.

Some student teachers, however, are aware of what constraints the track-system places on students and how these constraints can affect their students' work.

> (Luke Adams, Math) By the time they're in the ninth grade, they're already convinced they're not good students and they can't learn.
>
> (Arlene Henry, Science) They have had less success in school. So, they're less willing to put forth any effort because in the past their effort has resulted in failure...I saw kids who would just say "I'm going to fail anyway. Why should I try? I don't know anything. I don't even want to play this game."
>
> (Kathleen Stacey, Social Studies) I really do believe that everybody who's in high school can perform at the same level. Sure, you're going to get a couple of kids with IQs of 130 and above. You're going to get a couple of kids who are down near 100. That doesn't really matter...Because they're all intelligent, bright kids.

The question arises why some student teachers remain supportive of a system that denies equal quality and opportunity in education (Schafer & Olexa, 1971; Rosenbaum, 1976; Persell, 1977; Oakes, 1985) and of a system designed to maintain racial and class barriers (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Howe & Edelman, 1985). For the most part, student teachers may not be aware of this research. Or they may be aware of it and the research itself may not be compelling enough to question their perspectives.

As stated earlier, some student teachers do not find fault with the system. They find fault with the individual. Some student teachers look to the student's home as the source of the problem. It is the student's parents who do not care and thus, makes the student not want to care. Some student teachers use such labels as "learning disabled" or "special education" when referring to students in the lower

track. These labels, couched in the language and mystique of science, place the blame not on the student and not on the parent but on nature. Each set of reasons continues to blame everyone or everything but the system itself.

How can student teachers find legitimacy in these reasons? On the one hand, our cultural doctrine of individual responsibility helps to give credence to the notion of individual choice. The media often provide news coverage of events that may cause us all to question the sanity of our society. The prestige and the authority of science, also, stamp the badge of legitimacy on such terms as "learning disabled" and "special education." Furthermore, we have seen how experienced professionals provide support for the track-system. But besides these elements, it is the engagement of student teachers with students in their upper level classes that must legitimize student teachers' responses. These students in the upper level "fit" the definition of "students" who pay attention, do their work and respond according to the student teachers' frame of references. These are the students who make the track-system seem reasonable and rational and, thus, legitimate. Perhaps, it is this experience of working with "good" students that helps to give credence to their developing perspectives.

> (Arnold Jones, English) [The upper level class] they're friendly. They relate far more easily to me. Not as being a threatening figure but somebody who they can interact with and who

> they're curious about...Motivation, that's immediately apparent, at least among some of them. I suppose dress too. The dress is more conventionally oriented. Hairstyle is more conventionally oriented. At least they don't have the punk hairdos...If I give them a little bit of precautionary "Let's have one at a time," they'll do it. Whereas the other class will continue talking all at once.
>
> (Mike Anderson, Math) When I taught precalc, the juniors I had were the ones...in the fast track...The seniors in it were really solid students...Those kids were very much at ease...I could have normal conversations with them...I could make jokes with these precalc kids and they laugh. They weren't as weird about school or they weren't trying to find ways to laugh about you or...make fun of the teacher.

Students in the upper level classes provide student teachers with positive reinforcement. For the most part, they are not a "hassle" to teach. They do not pose a threat to the student teacher. They represent as Elizabeth Oliver has stated, the "All-American Student."

> (Elizabeth Oliver, Science) [The upper level] is a group of students who are motivated. They have a high self-esteem. They know what their goals are. For the most part, they've set them...They're much more mature in the way that they handle themselves...My goal is not trying to figure out how to teach because I know I'm going to teach it in terms of a lecture form. I know that it's the way that they like it best, because they're programmed for it.
>
> (Robert Goldman, Social Studies) In my upper level classes, I don't get resistance. I don't get resistance on homework or on tests. The kids like to do it...They enjoy what they're doing or at least they still see there's some goal to it. The kids will come after school and drop off homework that they didn't get done for the class...It's reinforcing to me to see that kind of behavior.

Working with these students makes the track-system tolerable. This is what makes teaching in a track-system "easier." (Arlene Henry, Science) "You don't have to ask them to open up a notebook and take notes. They actually open up their notebooks trying to understand every word you're saying. I think that's a bit easier." It is this movement from one class period with resistant students to another class period with cooperative students that gives legitimacy to the track-system.

Student teachers, in working with students at all levels, develop attitudes toward these students and formulate reasons about why these students are the way they are. In addition, student teachers develop instructional strategies for teaching each group of students.

Most student teachers are compelled to participate in this process of working differently with students in different tracks. This compulsion develops in part from their own assessments of students' capabilities. They are also initially dependent on their cooperating teacher's perspective on how to teach to different groups of students. Student teachers' classroom activities are dependent on the students that they teach. The students in each track help to define how student teachers prepare and instruct.

Student teachers' assessments about their students' capabilities appear to stem from the designated level of their class. This distinction between levels and what they

can handle is expressed here by this student teacher. The curriculum becomes not the medium of intellectual engagement but rather material to be delivered.

> (Jay Kenney, English) Eleven Two is the second level, not quite the top students, but definitely pretty bright, and can handle a fairly serious degree of literature. The other class is an Eleven Four. You abandon that traditional English Literature structure and curriculum entirely, fully, and wholly. They have touched on Shakespeare, Milton. They have touched on some of the biggies, but they do not read...those pieces. They read about them. They see film strips on them. They take quizzes on the information that's given to them. But they don't read the books themselves.

For Arnold Jones, the experience of working with students in the lower level affects his role as a teacher. His role is no longer imparting knowledge and engaging in intellectual discourse. He sees his role as orchestrating an environment in which structure and order can serve as the medium to teach students how to behave.

> (Arnold Jones, English) I also realize that I'm not so much a teacher in these lower level classes. I am sort of a person to be there and give them some kind of structure, some kind of role model, or somebody there to basically help them work things through. There's not a lot of learning that's going on there...It's more like, this is an hour of the day where we're all kind of learning to get along with each other, and learning to set some limits on behavior and things like that.

Elizabeth Oliver discussed her strategy for planning for instruction for the different levels that she taught. She provides insight into how she perceived her students'

capabilities and also, how she conceived of her role as a teacher.

> (Elizabeth Oliver, Science) [With the upper level] my task is much more subject oriented. It's much more concept oriented. It's a lot less concrete...I need to know what I'm discussing. I need to know my subject material well enough so that when they pose a question to me, I'm ready to answer...
>
> I've had to figure out what it is I want to teach, and then figure out how I'm going to get that across to them. In terms of content, for the general biology [class], I have everything written out. The content is right there. All I have to do is reiterate what's written down there. So, I don't have to know everything in my head. What I say to them is already written down...I have a transparency in front of me...It's written out in complete sentences. For instance, the egg will leave the blank and take a leap into the blank, blank: two words, Fallopian tubes...That's a typical general biology lesson...This is how I will teach the human reproductive system...The general biology students fill-in-the-blanks...These fill-in-the-blanks are their notes...If it's not concrete, they're not going to get it. So, it has to be concrete.

Elizabeth Oliver, for example, met success in her work with the lower level by utilizing strategies that appear to be fail proof. Filling-in-the-blanks is a successful activity. Students are on task. It can be measured. Thus, the appearance of student activity becomes a means by which some student teachers can find success. The teaching process is reduced to students performing appropriately. The appearance of order means that teaching is being accomplished. An ordered and controlled classroom is a measurement of a teacher's effectiveness (Waller, 1932; Lortie, 1975) and a characteristic that some student teachers strive to attain (Britzman, 1986).

Some student teachers, however, develop strategies that move them beyond a didactic teaching role. Some begin to take responsibility for their own frustrations. They see themselves as contributing to the system by not expecting enough, by not demanding enough and by not planning enough. For the most part they move from being passive participants in the track-system and become active in making adjustments that will bring them success.

Chris Knight struggled throughout his student teaching experience to come to grips with the differences that he saw. He saw how students in the different levels are taught differently. He struggled to abandon making the distinction of students into bright and dull categories. But he admits that this struggle may not be enough to disregard the track-system.

> (Chris Knight, Science) When they [the lower level] were interested, it was really a good class. When they weren't interested, it was really tough. I'm not saying that it's their fault in any way. I was new. That was my third class that I picked up. It was the end of the year, it was tough. They were hot and cold. One day they would be more than willing to do what you wanted them to do. The next day, they weren't interested at all.
>
> I didn't think there was any group that was easier to teach than the other ones...The senior class [an upper level] was probably my favorite class, because I could relate to them better...At the beginning, it was easier, because I could spend a lot of time with one class. Then I picked up two classes and it wasn't as easy. By the time I picked up three classes, it was really tough...Towards the end, I spent a lot of time...lecturing to them. It got really boring.
>
> I tried not to think about it so much as "This group of kids is brighter than this group of

> kids." I didn't try to. There's probably lots of things that I didn't realize that I was doing that kind of catered to the whole tr[illegible]-system...I think I tried with each class the different teaching models...I tried the same type of things with each different class. They didn't always work the same for one reason or another...I guess thinking about the tracking, really bothered me before and during [the experience]. Even now it still bothers me...It made it really tough. After class or the end of the day, I would just say, "Holy sh--, why did I just put myself through all that? Why don't I spend all my time right now until I go to sleep, just planning, planning, planning, planning, so, tomorrow will be fine." Sometimes I would do that. The next day would run smooth as silk. It'd be great. I'd do that for a few days. Then all of a sudden I wouldn't prepare well enough for one class.
>
> I guess I just started to fall into a rut, where the more pressure I felt I had that it was just easier to plan a lecture, to plan a lab than it was to go about learning a whole new [teaching] model...It took less time.

The pressures of the daily routine, trying to keep up with classes and trying to be innovative, sometimes are too much to permit thoughtful development of lessons. For the student teachers, not being able to surpass these pressures may be attributed to their newness at the job. But Nancy Katz, in her second year of teaching, attests to the difficulty of trying to deal with classes that are supposedly easier to teach when separated by supposed ability.

> (Nancy Katz, Health, Beginning Teacher) It really stresses me out to try to think of ways that I can get the topic across in a way that will be interesting for them...With one prep period a day, it is difficult to try to vary your lesson. "Well, today I'm going to teach nutrition. Now, how can I do this with the top group? Well, what can I do with the lower group?" The middle group kind of falls right in there. That's your lesson

plan for the middle kids. You try to take it up and you try to take it down. It's hard with just forty minutes, to try to get everything set in your mind. That's the hardest thing I've found, when they were tracked, the first year, was trying to figure out what to do.

Conclusions

We have seen that student teachers react to the track-system in various ways. For some, the track-system represents a logical response to how to deal with a population assumed to be different in their intellectual abilities. Others find the track-system to be an annoyance that has to be tolerated. And some are opposed to the track-system and begin in student teaching to work against tracking's effects on their students in their classrooms.

The context of tracking is perpetuated by administrators, teachers and students who by their actions give meaning to the validity of a track-system. It is perpetuated by individuals with their own perspectives, who interact and give meaning to constructs that support tracking. It is in the day-to-day interactions among people who buy into the idea of tracking that tracking is reproduced.

For the participants in this study, some will go into schools and participate and thus, give meaning to the track-system. Some student teachers will enter and continue to question the workings of a track-system. Others, however, will enter, question, struggle and perhaps, depart.

Preservice teacher education students need to explore in their prepracticum courses their own experience with tracking as public school students. In order for students to understand how they come to have a perspective about tracking, it is necessary that they understand their own history with tracking.

We have learned that for most participants in this study, their schooling took place in the upper tracks. This piece of information, shared in the context of a class of prospective teachers, can become the basis to explore such issues as: Why do most students in college share a similar school experience? Why do most students in college appear to come from a similar economic background? How is it that most students in college are white? What is meant by equal educational opportunity? Thus, their own experiences become the focus of a critique of schooling and tracking.

Prepracticum programs should examine and investigate learning theories that promote and support intellectual distinctions among people. Learning disabilities, theories of left and right brain hemispheric distinctions and cognitive learning styles are further examples of unanalyzed colloquialisms. Though these topics may be approached in educational psychology course, it is necessary to examine such theories within the context of education. (This examination can begin to take place with a critical analysis of Special Education. How are students selected for Special

Education? What is the relationship between one's racial and class membership and one's placement in Special Education? What role does a student's behavior play in assigning a student to a Special Education class?)

The participants in this study are neither uncaring about their students nor irresponsible or uncommitted in learning how to do their best. They do care. They are responsible and committed. But given the context of tracking, one needs to question how effective these participants can be. Furthermore, it is important that we, teacher educators, listen carefully to their student teachers' experiences and begin to reflect on our own practice and seek to find methods to lessen the impact of tracking on student teachers.

Afterword

During the course of this study, I was told about a secondary school that was in the process of dismantling its track-system. The school was beginning to group students heterogeneously in the areas of English and social studies. The school was located about twenty miles from the university. So, very few student teachers went there to practice teach. I was however, able to interview two student teachers who chose to teach in heterogeneous classrooms. I wanted to find out a) what their experience as student teachers in a heterogeneous classroom was like and b) how did their experience compare to or differ from student teachers in a track-system. These two student teachers were also from the same teacher education program as the other student teachers in this study.

I am well-aware as a researcher that to draw conclusions or to make generalizations based on these two student teachers is poor research. But as a researcher, I was struck by the language that they used to describe their students and also, to discuss their work as teachers.

> (Ethan Edwards, Social Studies) With the heterogeneous classroom, the assumption is, for me, that everybody's different. I went into the room and I learned about the students as quickly as I could. That meant [giving] them some writing and stuff like that so I have a chance to know them a little bit. Who they were as well as what their ability was. I could tell both of those [things] by having them write for me as well as interacting in class. Then it was up to me to set

some standards. "What's Peter's ability? What's Ann's ability? What's Judy's ability? What should I be expecting out of them?"

You can't compare Peter to Ann. You have to find a way to justify what you're doing. So, my A for Peter and my A for Ann are not the same A. It's based on what he's done and how he's improved.

It's more work to come up with a way to be more flexible. I want to give them more flexibility so that they can show me what they know, not what they don't know. One way is writing. Even somebody like Peter who really has poor writing skills. When he does write, it helps him. Helps [him] get better at writing. Helps him get better at communicating.

(Natalie Kohl, English) [In this school] I think that none of the preconceptions that were associated with college bound or general students are really so predominant. They exist among some of the teachers...Most of us consciously have wiped out those kinds of expectations...What that ends up meaning is that we tend to treat students more as individuals than as a sort of aggregate of their particular skills. I think that's true of me. I really think that most of us are aware of the fact that in the past and in other places students are dealt with as statistics. "This is a good student. This is a student who's going... This is a student you have to watch out for or can't trust."...It's a place where teachers have to be, I think, really conscious about the variety in people.

It appears that this change in grouping pattern may affect how student teachers come to view their students and their role as teachers. For these two student teachers, the experience of working in heterogeneous classrooms helps to sustain their perspective of their students as individuals with distinct learning issues. Furthermore, in working with a heterogeneous group, the student teachers designed classroom activities so that all students could participate. For the most part, however, we hear student teachers in the

track-system describing their students in terms of the level and label that distinguishes their students.

It is important to raise the following questions: What would have happened if any of the student teachers in a track-system had taught in a heterogeneous setting? How would their prior experience in the upper tracks affect their perspective of students in a heterogeneous classroom? How would they describe their students? How would they structure their lessons and execute them? In essence, does the structure and description of the classroom, as tracked or heterogeneous, impact on the experience of student teachers and their developing perspective as new professionals?

I accept the present thinking on the understanding of teacher socialization as an interactive process. Individuals come to a situation with preconceived ideas about what they want to do and within the context of that experience develop perspectives that help them to negotiate the situation. Furthermore, if we asked individuals to explain their perspectives, then they would be able to do so. But I am intrigued by the notion of whether a change in context will change the person's developing perspective. For example, if Elizabeth Oliver or Theresa Pappas had student taught in a heterogeneous classroom, would their perspectives on teaching students of diverse ability have been different? I would admit that their experience would

be different. But would it be different enough to change how they conceived of and executed their teaching tasks? This requires further research into the relationship among one's prior experience as a student, one's experience in teacher education programs and one's student teaching experience.

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